

## Early and High Middle Ages

### Overview



*St Maurice's Abbey, canton of Valais, founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and strategically positioned at a narrow section of the valley. © Marc-André Miserez/swissinfo*

The period which followed on from the Roman Empire and lasted from around 500 to 1000 AD is generally referred to as the Early Middle Ages.

The area covered by present-day Switzerland underwent a similar development to that of the rest of Western Europe.

The earliest centuries were marked by mass migration (Barbarian Invasions). Switzerland too saw the arrival of many different settlers, each bringing their own way of life and language.

Christianity, which had already been introduced by the Romans, became widespread thanks partly to the work of missionaries. The Church, together with its dioceses and monasteries, became a major landowner and enjoyed all the attendant rights over the people who lived on and worked its lands.

At the same time, noble families were expanding their power base through conquests, inheritance and marriage.

For a brief period the King of the Franks, Charlemagne, controlled a large swathe of Western Europe. In 800 AD, he became the first medieval ruler to be crowned Emperor.

Yet, the reign of Charlemagne did not establish any real idea of state. At each level of society, relations between the strong and weak were based on personal dependencies. The emperor ruled over a network of noble families, with kings, dukes and princes constantly jostling for greater power in a bid to preserve or add to the privileges they enjoyed.

In 962, the German King Otto I was crowned emperor by the Pope in Rome. His empire would later become known as the Holy Roman Empire (with the addition of "German Nation" in the 15<sup>th</sup> century). In the Modern period, it was referred to as the German Empire or the Roman-German Empire.

## Linguistic boundaries

In post-Roman times linguistic boundaries began to form due to the arrival of the Germanic people.

The Alemanni moved into northern Switzerland in such large numbers that their language – a forerunner of today's Swiss German dialects – gradually displaced the local Romansh language.

On the other hand, the Burgundians adopted the language of the local Gallo-Roman population (in what is now western Switzerland) whom they ruled after the conquest of Savoy. By this time the Celtic dialect had given way to a form of Latin which developed into the various patois of western Switzerland before being taken over by standard French.

Other regions (Raetia, which the Alemanni failed to conquer and Ticino, which was under the rule of the Germanic Lombards) retained their Latin-related dialects, which developed into the languages (Romansh and Italian) still spoken in this region.

## The Franks and their sphere of influence



*Statue of Charlemagne set in an exterior wall, Zurich. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland*

From the 6th century onwards the Franks, a Germanic people, gradually moved in from the west. They first conquered the Burgundians, followed by the Alemanni and the Lombards.

Two successive Frankish dynasties – the Merovingians and the Carolingians – prevailed for a lengthy period which culminated in the reign of Charlemagne (742-814). However, his empire was divided up in 843 after the death of his son Louis the Pious. The area east of the River Aare became part of the eastern Frankish empire of Louis the German, while the areas west of the river became part of the short-lived kingdom of Middle Francia.

In 917 what is now eastern and central Switzerland was controlled by the eastern Frankish Duchy of Swabia, while western Switzerland, once part of the now dissolved Middle Francia, belonged to the House of Burgundy. It was not until 1032 that the entire territory of modern Switzerland was governed by a single ruler, namely the Holy Roman Emperor.

## Invasions



*A statue of St Bernhard on the eponymous mountain pass. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland*

In the early Middle Ages, local noble families were constantly fighting to gain more power. This left the area weak and attracted foreign invaders.

### The Saracens

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century several areas that are today part of Switzerland were threatened by the Saracens. The exact origin of these Muslim warriors and colonialists is unclear. All we know is that they moved from a base in Provence (southern France) towards northern Italy and conquered the western Alpine passes. Before they were repelled by local Frankish troops, they had managed to penetrate Valais and even reached as far as Chur.

### The Hungarians

At about the same time, the Hungarians also posed a threat to the northern plateau. The Hungarians originally came from Asia before reaching the Danube and moving westwards. In 917 they destroyed Basel and later burnt down the monasteries of St. Gall and Rheinau. It was only in 955 that the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto I, succeeded in driving them out.

## The role of Christianity



*Monastery of St John in Müstair (canton of Graubünden), which was founded in 800 AD. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland*

Christianity arrived in Switzerland during the Late Roman period. The oldest written evidence for this dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

In 381, Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Small churches were built in the fortified towns and dioceses were established in the main administrative centres.

After the departure of the Romans, Western Switzerland remained Christian under the Burgundians, while the Alemanni stayed pagan until the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It was only St. Gall, who accompanied the Irish monk Columbanus to Zurich and Lake Constance, who succeeded in winning the population over to Christianity. While Columbanus moved on to Italy, St. Gall remained in what is now eastern Switzerland (the city of St. Gallen is named after him). On the site of his former cell, the Abbey of St. Gall was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

During this period, many other monasteries were founded and these developed into important centres of learning and culture. Monasteries were often built in strategic locations – e.g. on roads that led to Alpine passes, such as Disentis and Müstair.

The Church also played an important role in politics. In order to strengthen their power against the local nobles, the German kings often gifted estates to monasteries and dioceses. As a result, many of them exercised power over places and people just like noble families did. Monasteries, in particular, played an important role in the settlement and cultivation of the land.

## The common people



A 13<sup>th</sup> century farmer at work – detail from the rose window of Lausanne Cathedral. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

Most people in Switzerland worked the land, though their living and working conditions varied considerably. There were those who ran a farm which they rented from a lord. Some were serfs who occupied land owned by the lord of the manor and were required to work it on his behalf. Others were free tenants, who gave the landowner a share of their crops as rent. Certain farmers had the opportunity to acquire ownership of land if, for example, they were prepared to cultivate it.

An important group of such people who knew how to make fallow land fertile were the German-speaking Walser, who had migrated eastwards in the 12-13<sup>th</sup> century from Upper Valais to Graubünden and Voralberg, as well as southwards to northern Italy. These people enjoyed many privileges because of the contribution they had made to the settlement and cultivation of Alpine areas.

## Switzerland as part of the Holy Roman Empire

In the year 1000 Switzerland belonged to three kingdoms: western Switzerland to the Kingdom of Burgundy, northern and eastern Switzerland to the Eastern Frankish Kingdom, and southern Switzerland to the Kingdom of Italy.

In 1030 the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad II, who ruled over Italy, as well as large swathes of western and central Europe, was crowned King of Burgundy in Payerne in 1033 and set about uniting the Swiss territories by placing them under the sovereignty of the Holy Roman Empire. However, the local rulers came from very

different backgrounds: some were members of important noble families, while others were non-aristocratic landowners, abbots or bishops.

Not all of these rulers had the same rights. Many rights were guaranteed personally by the Emperor to individuals and later to communities. However, the rights retained by the local rulers (minting of coins, collection of customs duties, running of markets and management of the courts) helped them to become wealthy.

## The Emperor and the nobility



*Burgdorf Castle, canton of Bern. Built by Duke Konrad of Zähringen in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the castle fell into the hands of the Kyburgs in 1218 and was bought by the city of Berne in 1384. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland*

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century, rulers of the German empire were elected by the German princes and only members of certain families could compete for election. If an emperor was weak, the powerful families virtually had a free hand. The most influential families on Swiss territory were the Zähringers (founders of Bern and Fribourg), the Counts of Savoy, the Kyburgs and the Habsburgs.

The Emperor was backed by two pillars of power:

- 1) The personal power of his family's properties
- 2) His power as ruler of an entire empire.

This duality also played an important role in Swiss history, such as when members of the Habsburg family, which owned much land and was very influential in Switzerland, were elected emperor.

## The revival of towns and trade



*'Cart ruts' in Vuiteboeuf, canton of Vaud: the two parallel ruts in the solid rocks stopped carts losing control as they braked. Long thought to be from Roman times, they actually date from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland*

The 11<sup>th</sup> century was marked by major economic growth in Switzerland and elsewhere.

Agricultural production – as a result of favourable climatic conditions and improved cultivation techniques – was enhanced. The more conducive living conditions led to population growth since the increased harvests

meant that more people could be fed. Not all those who were able to work needed or were able to be employed in agriculture and so new professions began to develop. These artisans and merchants converged on places that were easily accessible and close to the local seat of power. As a result, cities emerged that would become veritable boom towns during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

An important milestone in the development of Switzerland was the opening of the Gotthard Pass in 1220. The areas to the north of the pass (Uri and Schwyz) became coveted territories because the lucrative trade route to Italy could be controlled from them.

## Imperial Immediacy



*In 1218 King Frederik II declared Bern an imperial free city. The picture is part of a series of paintings (1585–1586) by the French artist Humbert Mareschet, which hang in Bern Town Hall. © Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern.*

The Emperor guaranteed Uri (1231) and Schwyz (1240) *Reichsunmittelbarkeit* or imperial immediacy, which meant these areas were directly subordinate to the Emperor. This status was highly sought after because it afforded the local population considerable autonomy over its local affairs

The privilege of imperial immediacy was extended across the empire, with many towns acquiring the status of Imperial Free City. In contrast, imperial immediacy was granted less seldom to rural areas, as these were mainly inhabited by farmers who had their own land which they had cultivated themselves.